

## THE ITALIAN ETHNOLOGICAL MISSION TO GHANA AND CULTURAL COOPERATION: HERITAGE-MAKING PROCESSES IN THE NZEMA AREA (SOUTH-WEST GHANA)<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In the last fifteen years the Italian Ethnological Mission to Ghana (IEMG), established in 1956, has been supporting cultural cooperation projects aiming to the valorisation of natural and cultural heritage of the Nzema area (South-West Ghana). The long-term relationships between IEMG anthropologists and local actors have led representatives of Ghanaian communities and institutions to ask for a restitution of knowledge gathered throughout the years by researchers.

In order to meet these requests, in mid-1990s IEMG opened the way to the international cooperation in the area, and promoted development projects focused on micro-credit. However, the restitution of ethnographic knowledge has mostly been achieved through the cultural cooperation project *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas. Community-based Management of Natural and Cultural Heritage, Western Region* (2008-2011). Managed by COSPE NGO (Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries) in collaboration with IEMG and many Ghanaian institutional actors, this project culminated in 2010 in the establishment of a museum-cultural centre. Today, the *Fort Apollonia Museum of Nzema Culture and History* plays a leading role in the safeguarding and valorisation of local heritage, as it is testified by its recent participation to a project – founded by the British Library and Sapienza University of Rome – concerning the conservation and digitization of archival documents belonging to Nzema traditional authorities. This project is part of a wider program aiming to the establishment of a digital archive including the documents related to Nzema chieftaincy as well as the research materials produced by IEMG scholars, currently being catalogued and digitized at Sapienza University of Rome.

This paper will illustrate the main features of the ongoing ethnographic restitution process, focusing on synergetic interactions among anthropologists, local actors and NGOs. Thus, the authors will discuss how an academic Mission, within a specific area, can trigger development processes and then contribute to the shifting of development cooperation into cultural cooperation. Finally, they will point out the results of this multifaceted relation among academia, Ghanaian interlocutors and development operators, in terms of local empowerment.

### THE ITALIAN ETHNOLOGICAL MISSION TO GHANA AND ITS LONG-TERM RELATION WITH ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD

In 1956, Vinigi Grottanelli, holder of the first chair of Ethnology in Italy, established the Italian Ethnological Mission to Ghana (IEMG), a multidisciplinary team of scholars carrying out its linguistic, historical and ethnological surveys in the Nzema area<sup>2</sup>, South-West Ghana. IEMG developed in two significant research phases, characterized by different methodological and epistemological perspectives, as well as by different relations with the fieldwork. The first IEMG research period (1956-1975) distinguished itself for a scientific approach enhancing the “authentic” and the “traditional” with the aim of obtaining a holistic and organic representation of the various components of society, «before the brutal impact of modernization could radically transform them» (Grottanelli, 1978, p. XIII, authors’ translation). Among the investigated topics, the classical themes of Africanist ethnography were extensively examined: the individual’s life cycle, with its rites of passage; magic and witchcraft; traditional medical practices; otherworldly entities and ancestors (Cerulli, 1963; Grottanelli, 1977, 1978; Lanternari, 1972; Signorini, 1978). Interactions among local people and colonial authorities, as well as slavery and any other process of cultural change, were at the same time

<sup>1</sup> The paragraph “The Italian Ethnological Mission to Ghana and its long-term relation with ethnographic field” has been written by Elisa Vasconi; “From development cooperation to cultural cooperation” has been written by Mariaclaudia Cristofano; “Fort Apollonia today” has been written by Stefano Maltese.

<sup>2</sup> We refer here to the wider coastal region, with the Ankobra (Siane) Estuary as a western border and the Tano (Tanoë) River and the lagoons separating Ghana from Ivory Coast (Eby and Tano-Ehy lagoons) as an eastern border. This territory, which is part of the wider Akan lands, covers two traditional areas (Western Nzema Traditional Area, with Beyin as capital, and Eastern Nzema Traditional Area, with Atuabo as capital) and roughly matches two regional district assemblies (namely Jomoro District Assembly and Ellembele District Assembly).

neglected.

This phase ended with the publication of a comprehensive two-volumes monograph on Nzema society edited by Grottanelli (1977, 1978), including most of the researches of the so called “classical Nzema ethnography” (Pavanello, 1997-1998). The conclusion of this first period was marked also by Ghanaian political situation, characterized by coups leading to a military regime established in 1981 by Jerry John Rawlings, making anthropological surveys difficult to be arranged in a poor and marginal region as the Nzema area.

A second season officially started in 1989, when Mariano Pavanello succeeded to Grottanelli in the scientific direction of the Mission. In this period several scholars travelled to the area with the intention of examining issues left in the background by their predecessors. Their new approach did not mean to enhance an authentic and reified context, instead they tried to interpret the contemporary Nzema society taking into consideration the relations among the Nzemas, neighboring populations and Europeans. Distancing from what currently would be called an essentialist perspective, with the Nzemas portrayed as bounded and unchanging, a people without history, the second phase of IEMG has adopted a diachronic perspective, focusing on processes of transformation, cultural dynamism, negotiations of identities and sociopolitical order of the area. Pavanello's studies on local economy and oral traditions (2000, 2007), as well as Valsecchi's historical studies (2002), investigated the cultural interactions that characterised this territory at least since the arrival of Portuguese, presenting a different vision of history based on contact and relationships (Aria, Cristofano and Maltese, 2014, forthcoming). Thus, IEMG scholars deeply immersed themselves in Nzema society in order to cast an in-depth look on sensitive themes such as the relation with ancestors, local history, land tenure system and the creative dimensions of tradition.

In this framework Pavanello built deep relations with traditional rulers, in doing so achieving a near-chiefly status himself as well as the access to the most hidden levels of historical knowledge. Among them, a preeminent role has been played by Annor Adjaye III, *ɔmanhene* (Paramount Chief) of the *Western Nzema Traditional Area*, promoter together with Pavanello of development and valorisation projects throughout the territory. He paradigmatically embodied a new traditional authority model, in line with the extraordinary revival process properly suggested by the term “le retour des rois” (Perrot and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2003), and expressed in Ghana's 1992 constitutional reforms<sup>3</sup>. The *ɔmanhene* has always seemed to contradict the stereotypical idea of traditional chief: he achieved academic qualifications and advanced his career in the ranks of the civil service. Moreover, the Paramount Chief has shown the ability to master the language of development, as well as to convincingly relate with anthropological knowledge. An evidence of this new relation with IEMG researchers is provided by his two journeys in Italy arranged by Pavanello: the first in May 1996, as a guest of honour of an international conference on Akan studies in Urbino; the second in June 1997, aiming to involve Italian local governments into decentralized cooperation programs to be developed in the Nzema area. At the same time, at the end of 1990s, Annor Adjaye III shifted his attention on the ethnographic studies carried out in his area throughout the years. As Pavanello pointed out: «he was starting to consider anthropological fieldworks as an extractive activity to be done in accordance with a permit, and which expect a compensation» (Pavanello, 2007, p. 135, authors' translation). Thus, the Paramount Chief confronted the Italian scholars with the unavoidable issue of ethnographic restitution, that is the way to share the outcomes of IEMG activities with local communities.

Emphasizing the importance of the Italian scholars' long-time relationship with the Nzema area since the time of Grottanelli, Annor Adjaye III reminded anthropologists of their duties to make the outcomes of their research available to the Nzema people, and stimulated them to undertake some kind of activities in order to provide a fair compensation to the local communities in return for their cooperation over the years (Pavanello, 2007). The restitution and development rhetoric fielded by the *ɔmanhene* in his interactions with the Italian academics become a key aspect of Annor Adjaye III's political legitimization in front of governmental authorities, local chiefs and population.

In order to meet the requests of the most authoritative local chief, Pavanello was «forced to think about the stake of anthropological research» (Pavanello, 2007, p. 135, authors' translation). Thus, he decided to promote new development programs introducing the Italian NGO COSPE (*Cooperation for the development of emerging countries*) and the Tuscan Municipality of Peccioli, where he resides. The first project, started in 1998, led to the creation of a mechanical workshop school in Bawhia (Jomoro District), carried out in collaboration with Ghanaian national and traditional authorities. This intervention opened the way to further decentralized cooperation programs, and marked the turn of Pavanello's role from researcher to development promoter (Pavanello, 2007). This was followed by a second and more extended project founded by European Commission, entitled *Small and Micro Enterprises Support System* (SMESS). It aimed at sustaining micro-credit and encouraging the creation of a local network of entrepreneurs and artisans. Lasted almost ten years, the SMESS triggered the establishment of several associations and trained more than 2500 Nzema artisans – tailors, carpenters, mechanics, oil producers, etc. – in enterprise, budget and credits management.

At the beginning of 2000s, the completion of these programs and the experience and knowledge gained by development operators, led to a wider and different project, far from economic and development issues characterising

<sup>3</sup> Concluding the legislative reform process started in the late 1960s, the new 1992 Constitution recognized the traditional chieftaincy's prerogatives but also established limits on the scope of their authority. Specifically, traditional chiefs were granted a status of autonomous institutional entities, but were at the same time forbidden to run in governmental elections. In this new context, chiefs reaffirmed the sacredness and the relevance of their role by staging ritual performances, and they also displayed great skill in gaining consensus outside the political arena, not least in their openness to new opportunities offered by international cooperation.

the previous interventions. The project *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas. Community-based Management of Natural and Cultural Heritage, Western Ghana* was approved and funded in 2005 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It represented a turning point within the development cooperation in the Nzema area, in which the IEMG anthropologists have played an outstanding role.

## FROM DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION TO CULTURAL COOPERATION

Throughout its history, IEMG has not only distinguished itself for scientific works and peculiar relations with fieldwork, but also for its special link with a symbolic site both for Europeans and Nzemas: Fort Apollonia. It is a British stronghold built at the end of the Eighteenth Century at Beyin, capital of Western Nzema Traditional Area.

In 1968 Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of independent Ghana, promoted its restoration to enhance the Nzema area – his place of origin – and contrast its backwardness and marginality, at that time seeming to be inevitable. He also accorded to IEMG anthropologists the permit of housing in the castle during their surveys: therefore Fort Apollonia became their residence. The situation started to change in 1998, when *Ghana Museums and Monuments Board* (GMMB) – the governmental body in charge for the administration of both national museums and historical buildings – granted the anthropologists exclusive use of the fort. In return, GMMB asked them to work out a strategy to turn Fort Apollonia into something useful for local population. Soon after, Pavanello encouraged Italian scholars to leave the fort and spread out into the territory, as himself did in 2002 moving into a raffia-hut in Old-Kabenlasuazo, a coastal village not far from Beyin (Aria, Cristofano and Maltese, 2012).

In this changing scenario, thanks to the joint efforts of different actors, both Ghanaians and Europeans, *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* started. This project, managed by COSPE from 2008 to 2011, was strongly supported by Italian anthropologists in order to meet the above mentioned restitution claims. It was also the outcome of national and international cooperation programs, which in mid-1990s were making of cultural and natural heritage valorisation a central feature of their actions. These are indeed the years of heritage policies promoted by international organizations like UNESCO, which find their achievement in an increased number of development projects aiming to actively involve local communities. In tune with the described new directions of international cooperation, also the Nzema area benefitted from valorisation programs. At the end of 1990s the NGO *Ghana Wildlife Society* (GWS) settled in Beyin to promote actions of eco-touristic requalification and conservation of the area<sup>4</sup>. Thus, anthropologists and COSPE included the already started GWS interventions within *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* project.

Therefore, in *Fort Apollonia project* conservation and valorisation of local cultural and natural heritage were identified as two key-elements for the human development of the Nzema people and for the improvement of their living conditions in an eco-compatible and self-sustainable way. The project aimed to carry out this complex purpose through three main objectives: 1) strengthening of possibilities and capabilities for the safeguarding and valorisation of local natural and cultural heritage; 2) improvement of entrepreneurial skills and chances for local people, with particular reference to economical activities related to the enhancement of local resources. 3) making local people aware of the importance of conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems and natural renewable sources. Each objective included different actions combining development of the area with the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage<sup>5</sup>.

Among them, the setting up of the *Fort Apollonia Museums of Nzema Culture and History* has played a central role. The museum-cultural centre was inaugurated on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2010 within the newly restored Fort Apollonia, to the presence of local population and representatives of the institutions involved within the project (Fig. 1).

*Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* has gathered different actors: on the European side IEMG, responsible for the design and the implementation of museum exhibitions; Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as main founder of the project; and COSPE, managing funds and interventions. On the Ghanaian side: GWS; representatives of traditional rule (*Western Nzema Traditional Council* and *Eastern Nzema Traditional Council*); decentralized governmental institutions (*Jomoro District Assembly* and *Ellembelle District Assembly*); GMMB; and other institutions dealing with the valorization of national cultural heritage (*National Commission on Culture*) and touristic promotion of the territory (*Ghana Tourist Board*).

In this framework, anthropologists have not only played the role of observers, instead they have become active agents of a collaborative heritage-making process. As young IEMG probationers who had focused their studies on heritage and museums, at the end of 2008 indeed COSPE employed two of us<sup>6</sup> to develop a museum proposal including

<sup>4</sup> The first important project carried out in the Nzema area by GWS is the ACID project (*Amanzule Conservation and Integrated Development project*). It aimed to the conservation of Amanzule lagoon ecosystem and to the «enhancement of its scenic beauty, ecological integrity, eco-tourism potential, and the economic well-being of the local community» (Abban, et al., 2009). It reinterpreted the Nzema area as a natural heritage and opened the way to the eco-touristic development of the area.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning point 1), the action focused on: the restoration of Fort Apollonia and the setting up of a museum-cultural centre within the stronghold; the support of local communities in the management of the museum; the identification of touristic trails which, starting from the museum, could lead to the discovery of the Nzema area. The essential purpose of the action described at point 2) was to make Nzema cultural and natural heritage an income-generating resource for the communities. Through production and selling of handicrafts, access to credit and training of local entrepreneurs, the project aimed to develop employment opportunities for local people. In accordance with point 3), the project aimed both to spread a new ecological awareness and to enhance hygienic conditions through the setting up of local sanitary infrastructures.

<sup>6</sup> The authors of this essay have played different roles in the process of cultural valorisation started in the frame of the *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* project. Since 2009, Mariaclaudia Cristofano and Stefano Maltese curated the museum project and set up its exhibits. Elisa Vasconi has collaborated

a number of key-topics to be developed in the exhibition, with the idea to submit such a proposal to the Project Management Committee (PMC) for close examination and approval. After negotiations and exchanges among us, local representatives and the PMC, these subjects came to include: the Nzema system of kinship and its seven clans; the hierarchy of traditional power; the *Kundum* festival; historical narratives of the area; the relationship between the human population and local ecosystems; and traditional medicine<sup>7</sup>.

Notwithstanding, at the beginning of the project the character of the museum to set up was not unambiguous. The actors taking part to its realization were wondering if Fort Apollonia should become an eco-museum, a historical and ethnographic museum, a gallery filled with showcases displaying objects, a cultural centre, a strategic tool for the economic growth of the area, a place mostly visited by tourists or local people. Another important issue was related to the method to be adopted to implement the exhibition. The development project charged us with “translating” into museum exhibits the knowledge gathered throughout the time by IEMG anthropologists. We were conscious that this task threatened to result in reifying and exoticising representations, marginalising local people’s agency, even if it was in accordance with the cultural restitution programme at the basis of the project. Thus, we tried to join the anthropological knowledge, with a kind of museum able to relate with the contemporary Nzema, through a reflexive operation of mediation and intentional contamination among different imaginations and languages. Our approach was informed by studies of heritage-making processes (e.g. Handler, 1988; Herzfeld, 1997; Lowenthal, 1998; Palumbo, 2003) and by the perspectives of museum anthropology (e.g. Karp and Lavine, 1991; Karp, Mullen Kreamer and Lavine, 1992; Clemente and Rossi, 1999; Karp, et. al, 2006; Padiglione, 2008). We aimed to avoid essentialising and classifying ideas of museum and cultural heritage, to connect “an anthropology *within* museums with an anthropology *of* museums” (Padiglione, 2008, p. 92), taking into account the intellectual and political contexts in which the heritage-building processes take place. In order to do so, we were encouraged to continuously shift from the role of museum designers to that of critical ethnographer and vice versa, which was the only way to reflexively analyse the representations that we ourselves had a hand in producing.

The two methodologies adopted gave us the opportunity to show in *Fort Apollonia Museum* a plurality of views on Nzema society, avoiding the knowledge and the academic authority of the anthropologists to prevail. Thus, in the participatory spirit of museum anthropology, both the outline and the setting up of the exhibition were carried out through a series of workshops involving different actors. Throughout the process, constant collaborations were taking place among us as anthropologists, with the *Nzema Art and Crafts Association* (a regional craft association), and other Ghanaian individuals who played a role in the development of the museum thanks to their skills or position in the community.

The setting up of *Fort Apollonia Museum* represents the outcome of continuous negotiations among different actors’ representations. It has revealed conflicts and problems usually characterizing the establishment of a museum as an institution (Clifford, 1997), as well as the carrying out of a development project (Oliver de Sardan, 1995). However, *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* project has also promoted the museum as a new cultural institution strongly rooted in the Nzema area, today representing a point of reference for local communities, drawing the attention of national and international tourism, and promoting cultural cooperation programs.

## FORT APOLLONIA TODAY

Since its inauguration, the Fort Apollonia Museum has been acquiring relevance at local, national and – thanks to the projects recently undertaken – also international levels.

In 2012 a Scientific Committee including the major Ghanaian scholars has been instituted, with the support of the IEMG. Besides the promotion of the institution in the academic and institutional scenario, the Committee’s main objective is to facilitate the engagement of the Museum in new research projects. The political consequences of this operation have been so relevant to expedite the process for the employment of the museum staff by GMMB, which started immediately after the end of the *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* project and has been recently finalized. Since July 2011, the three professionals selected and trained by COSPE and the anthropologists have indeed been working for free, despite the fact that the official employment dates from December 2012. Although the staff employment looks as an important achievement, its instability has been delaying so far the activities of the Museum, such as educational programs for the schools and tourist promotion of the area.

Nevertheless, the Museum has been able to gain an important role in raising awareness about cultural and environmental issues, by organizing locally-based activities for the schools children, as well as by hosting summer schools for Italian students in cultural anthropology. Such a commitment gradually led the Museum to stand as a leading agency in several projects aimed at implementing cultural activities throughout the territory.

By the way, the implementation of some kinds of cultural cooperation with more defined objectives seemed particularly appropriate in order to intervene where the *Fort Apollonia and the Nzemas* project could not, as, for instance, in the sensitive matter concerning the history of the area. During the months in which the Museum exhibition was developed, and even earlier, the issue of local history had proved to be one of the most relevant and conflicting, no

to the setting up of the traditional medicine room as a medical anthropologist expert of the area.

<sup>7</sup> On the patrimonialisation of traditional medicine in Fort Apollonia see Cristofano, Maltese and Vasconi, 2013.



matter of the actors with which it was discussed within the project framework. All the partners agreed on the idea of dedicating a significant space in the exhibition to the issue, but the great conflicts among different oral traditions, strongly catalyzed by the lack of a documentary historiography based on archival materials, very soon proved to be a too big obstacle to be passed in the few weeks available to finalize the exhibition. However, some previous events could suggest a solution. In 2002 Pavanello had started, though he couldn't complete it, the re-organization of the Western Nzema Traditional Council historical archive, stored at the Paramount Chief's private residence. From then on, the *omanhene* often demanded the completion of that project, asserting the importance of archival material for the preservation of the historical memory in his area. Moreover, at the initial stage of the research which shaped the exhibition of the Fort Apollonia Museum, many traditional rulers expressed the idea that the Museum had to become the place where they could entrust the documents belonging to them. According to this idea, Fort Apollonia should have become something halfway between a museum and an archive, in which the documentary heritage scattered in the various villages of the area could have been preserved for future generations.

In this frame, a concrete opportunity to follow up the requests coming from the chiefs as well as to enable the Museum to play as a propulsive agent in the valorization of local history was provided by a cultural cooperation project aimed at safeguarding and digitizing endangered archival material. In February 2012 the Fort Apollonia Museum, supported by the IEMG, applied for funds to the British Library in the frame of the Endangered Archives Programme ([www.eap.bl.uk](http://www.eap.bl.uk)), as implementing agency of a ten-months pilot project named *Safeguarding Nzema History: Documents on Nzema Land in Ghanaian National and Local Archives*. Ended on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, the action had among its main objectives the securing, sorting and digitization of the documents kept in the archives of Western and Eastern Nzema Traditional Councils. This includes records that are relevant both for outlining the relations between written documents and oral sources, and for reconsidering the historical dynamics the area went through in the last two centuries. The European partners in this project were the British Library, the Department of History, Cultures, Religions of Sapienza University of Rome, the Centre for Research and Services DIGILAB of Sapienza and the Italian Ministry of Cultural Assets – Archives Directorate General. On the Ghanaian side, besides the Fort Apollonia Museum, the Western and Eastern Nzema Traditional Council Archives have been involved as beneficiaries of the action, while PRAAD (Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra central branch and Sekondi regional branch) and the Information Studies Department of the University of Ghana contributed by providing training and technical support.

The project *Safeguarding Nzema History* represents the first phase of a wider and more complex action of re-organization and digitization of the archival materials in possession of the Paramount Chiefs of the Nzema traditional areas. The museum staff and the anthropologists of the IEMG have recently applied to the same Programme for a major project aimed at completing the digitization of the materials in the Western and Eastern Nzema Traditional Council Archives and also at broadening the action in the Nzema-Evaloe traditional areas, namely Upper and Lower Axim, Edwira, Apatem and Nsein. The final objective, strongly backed up also by the hierarchy of the local traditional rule, is to establish a digital platform capable to host both the interactive exhibition of the Fort Apollonia Museum and the digitized records of Nzema chieftaincy. The IEMG is actively cooperating with local interlocutors to design such a platform, and is facilitating its development by providing technical know-how and mobilizing financial resources available both in Ghana and Italy.

As part of its restitution program the Mission is also engaged in a project aimed at cataloguing and digitizing the materials produced by its scholars, which will be eventually uploaded on the internet and made available for research purposes. Sapienza University of Rome is currently funding the digitization of selected pictures, slides, audio and video recordings, papers and books; such materials will become part of Sapienza Digital Library, the digital archival system of the University, and will be made accessible through the portal dedicated to the Fort Apollonia Museum.

By promoting cultural cooperation programs that are in tune with local interlocutors' claims for restitution and self-representation, the IEMG may actually be considered as one of the agents active in the shared heritage-making processes that are taking place in the Nzema area (Aria, Cristofano, Maltese, 2014 forthcoming). In a scenario characterized by a long-time relationship with its fieldwork, the Mission is currently trying to further its scientific vocation by promoting cooperation projects able to trigger original developments in the research activities. By doing so, it is committed in building upon and even fostering the ethnographic relationship between the Nzemas and the Italian anthropologists, whose peculiarity lies in its long duration as well as in the fruitful interaction established over the years with a network of Ghanaian local and national institutions.



**Fig. 1 - Fort Apollonia Museum of Nzema Culture and History, Beyin, Jomoro District, Western Region, Ghana.**

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